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G2J JGDA

(56) Documents Cited
WO 98/35250 A1 WO 96/41219 A WO 93/16403 A
WO 92/18888 A

(58) Field of Search
UK CL (Edition Q) G2J JGDA , G2X XB20B XB20X
INT CL⁶ G02B

(54) Abstract Title
Integrated optical components on a silicon-on-insulator chip

(57) A method of fabricating an integrated optical component on a silicon-on-insulator chip comprising a silicon layer 1 separated from a substrate 2 by an insulating layer 3. The component has a first set of features, eg a rib waveguide 5 at a first level in the silicon layer 1 adjacent the insulating layer 3 and a second set of features, eg a triangular section 6B at a second level in the silicon layer 1 further from the insulating layer 3. The method involves selecting a silicon-on-insulator chip having a silicon layer of sufficient thickness for the first set of features, then fabricating the first set of features in the silicon layer at a first level, increasing the thickness of the silicon layer in selected areas to form a second level of the silicon layer over part of the first level and then fabricating the second set of features at the second level in the silicon layer.

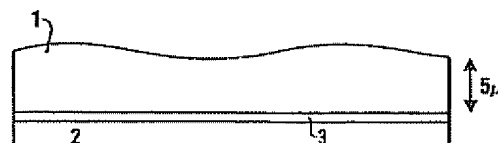


Fig. 1A

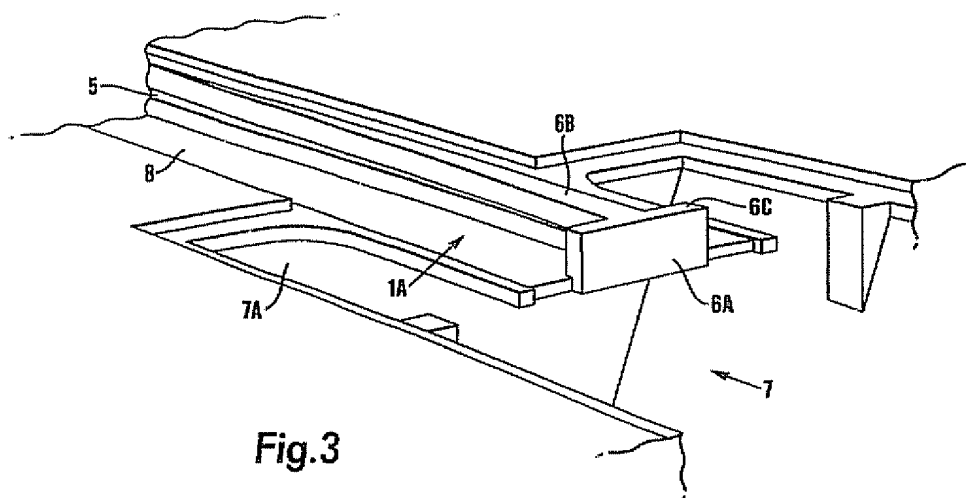


Fig. 3

At least one drawing originally filed was informal and the print reproduced here is taken from a later filed formal copy.

The print reflects an assignment of the application under the provisions of Section 30 of the Patents Act 1977.

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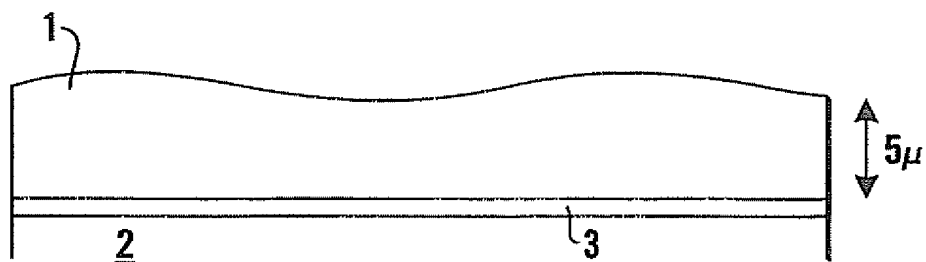


Fig. 1A

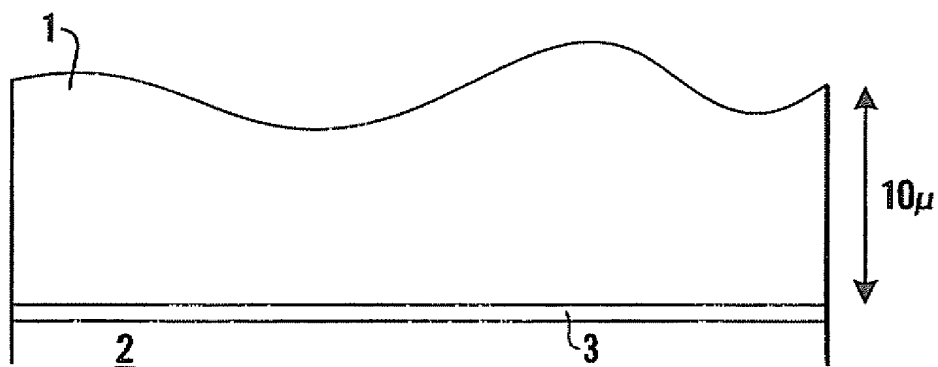


Fig. 1B

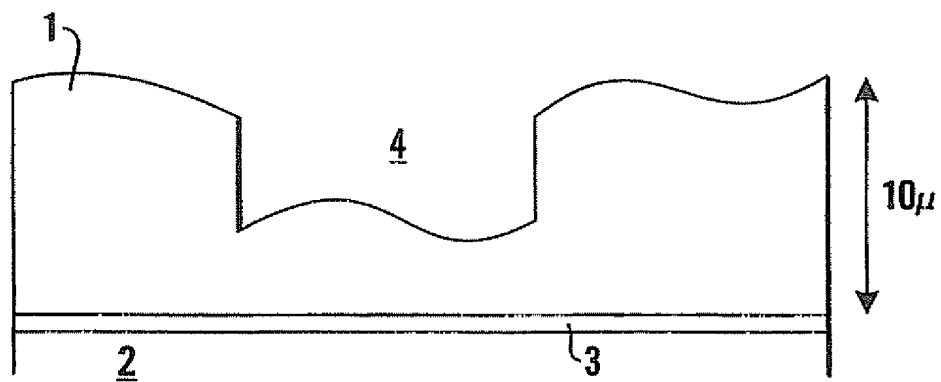


Fig. 1C

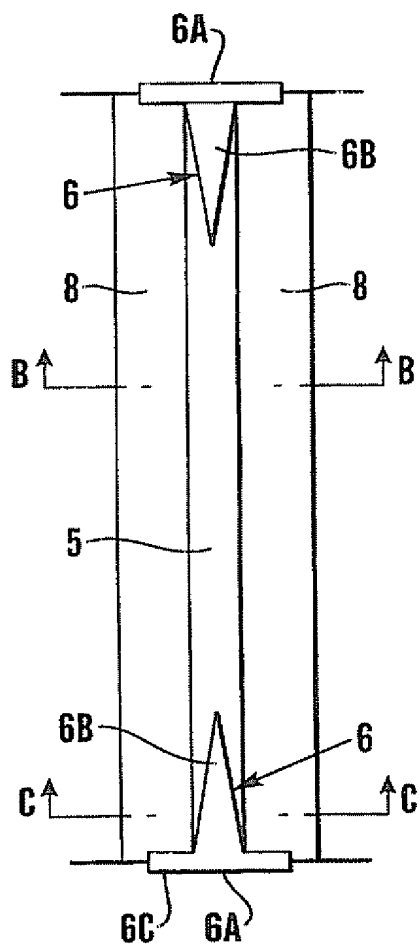


Fig. 2A

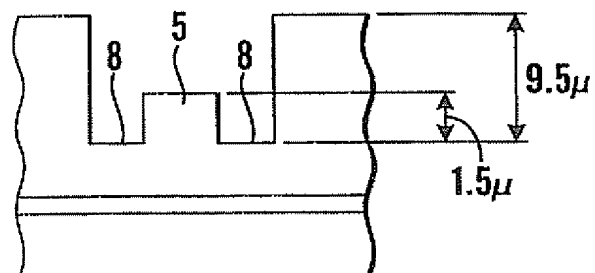


Fig. 2B

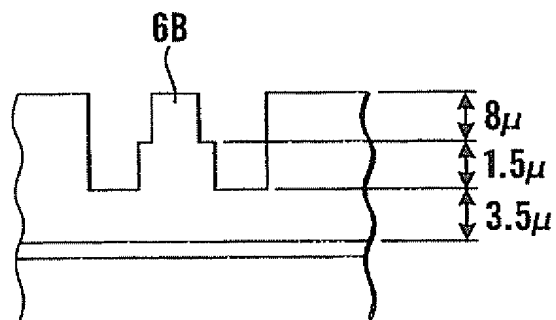


Fig. 2C

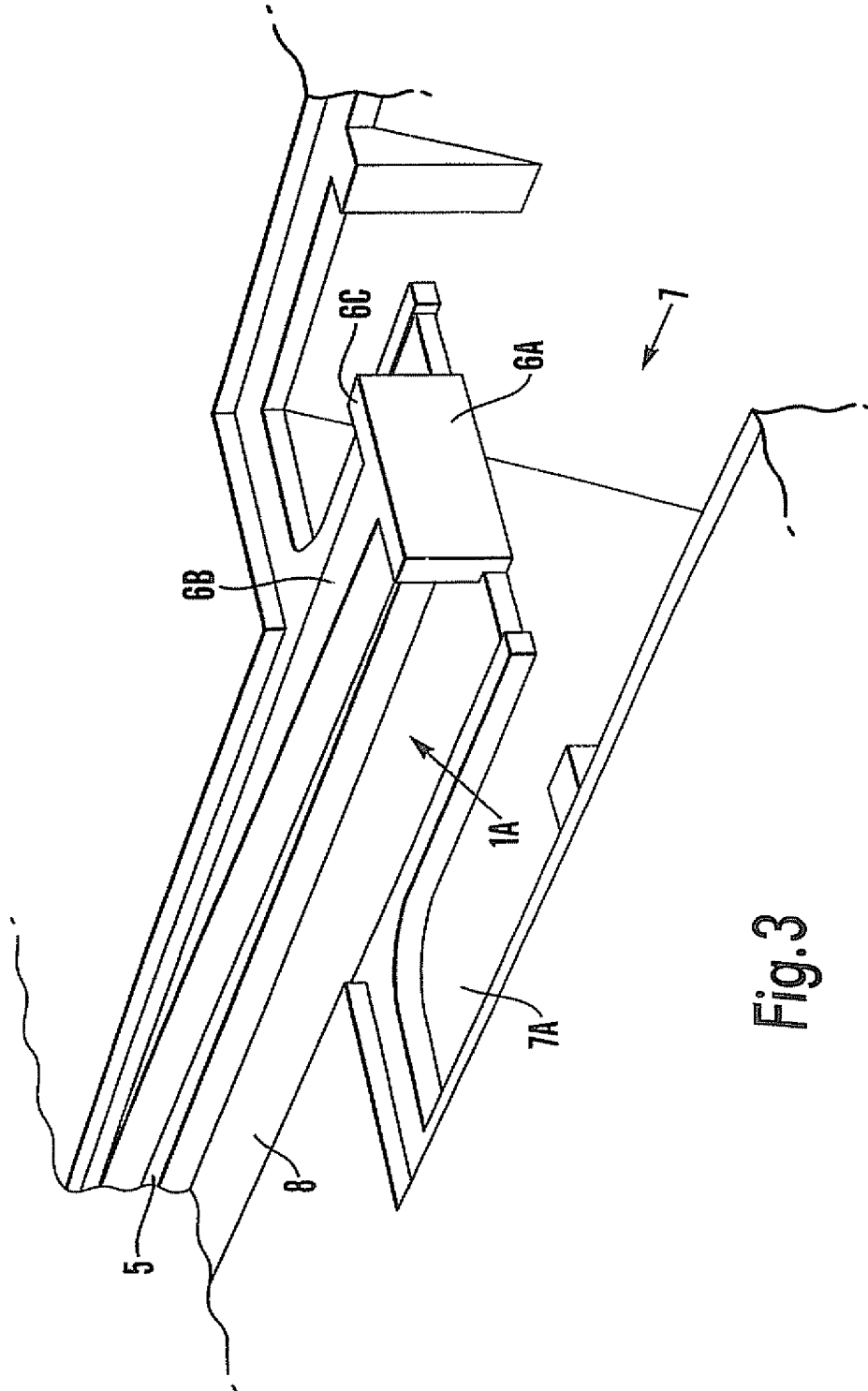


Fig. 3

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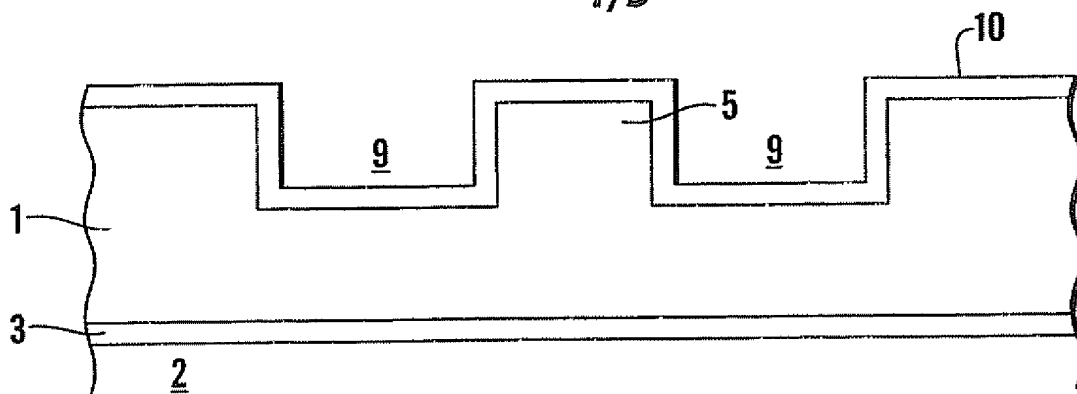


Fig.4A

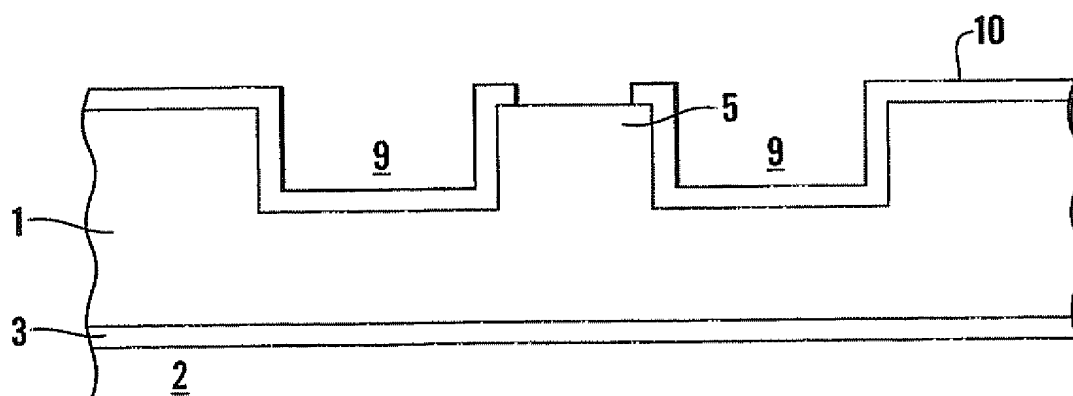


Fig.4B

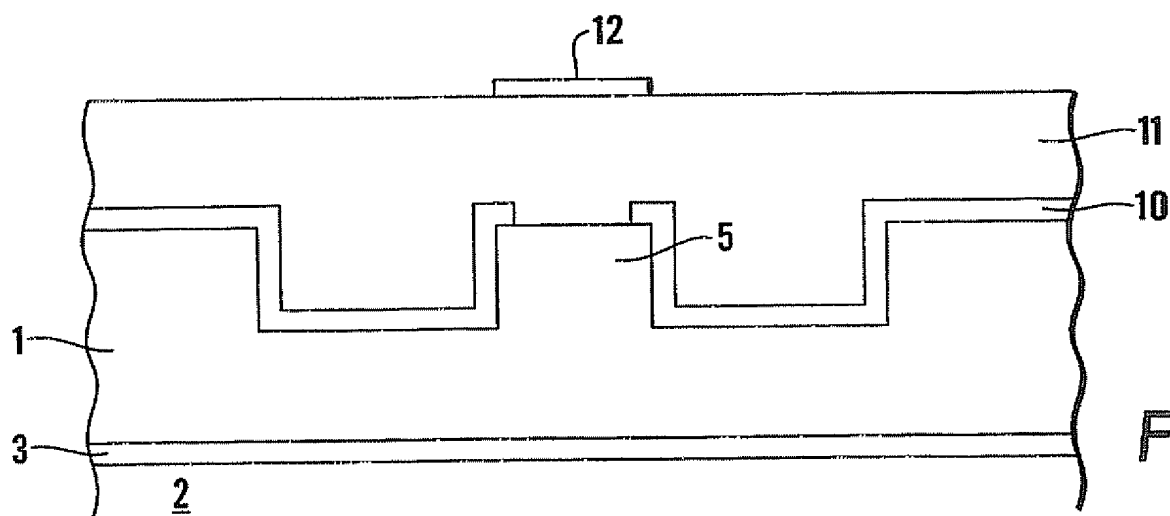


Fig.4C

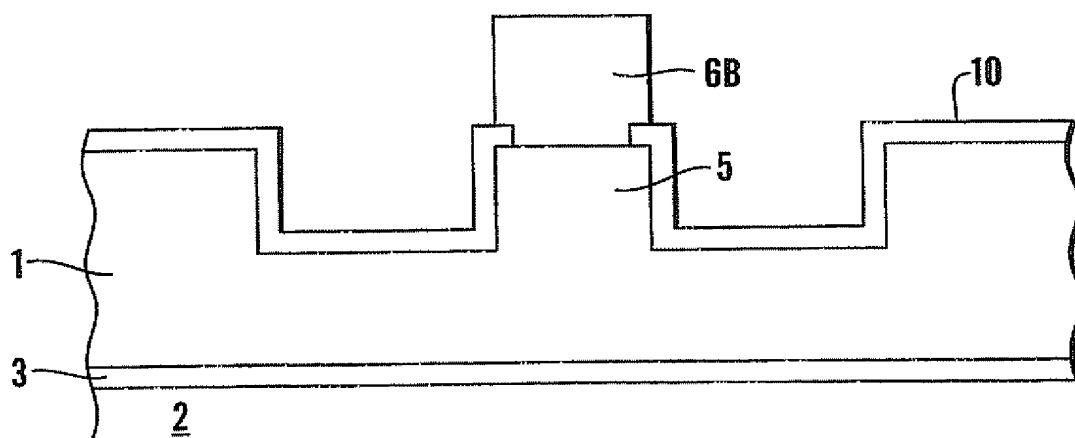


Fig.4D

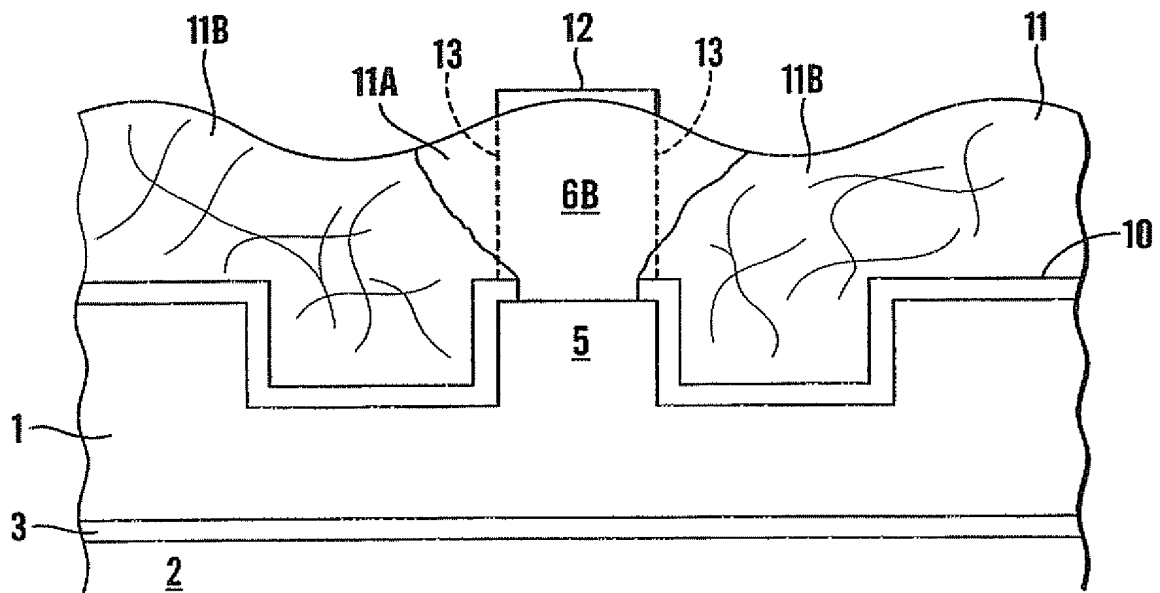


Fig.5

METHOD OF FABRICATING AN INTEGRATED
OPTICAL COMPONENT

This invention relates to a method of fabricating an integrated optical component on a silicon-on-insulator (SOI) chip comprising a layer of silicon separated from a substrate by an insulating layer, the component having a first set of features at a first level in the silicon layer and a second set of features at a second level in the silicon layer.

Integrated optical components may be fabricated in the silicon layer of an SOI chip. The silicon layer is typically up to 5 microns thick (but, in some cases, may be up to 10 microns thick) and features are defined therein by photolithographic techniques. Such optical components need to be fabricated with a high degree of accuracy to enable them to function correctly and known fabrication methods produce satisfactory yields for components formed on such chips.

In some cases, however, e.g. where a low loss optical connection is required between an integrated optical component and an optical fibre, there is a need to increase the thickness of the silicon layer, e.g. up to 13 microns or higher. If the SOI chip is initially fabricated with a silicon-layer of lower thickness, the thickness of the layer can be increased e.g. by epitaxial growth. Problems are, however, encountered in fabricating optical components in such thick silicon layers with sufficient accuracy, particularly when two stages of photolithography are required to form features at two different levels in the silicon layer. There are two principal reasons for the problem. Firstly, the thickness of the silicon layer of an SOI chip is not uniform and the thicker the layer, the greater the variations. Secondly, the accuracy with which a feature, particularly a depth dimension, can be etched, decreases with the thickness of the silicon layer, i.e. the deeper the etch the greater the variation in its dimensions. These two sources of inaccuracy tend to be accumulative. The problems become worse as the depth of the silicon layer and hence the depth of the features to be fabricated therein increase. This results in a gradual

reduction in yield as thicker silicon layers are used and it has been found that the yield may fall to an unacceptably low level for components fabricated in a silicon layer having a thickness of 10 microns or more.

The invention aims to provide an improved method of fabricating integrated optical components which increases the yield in such circumstances.

According to a first aspect of the invention there is provided a method of fabricating an integrated optical component on a silicon-on-insulator chip comprising a silicon layer separated from a substrate by an insulating layer, the component having a first set of features at a first level in the silicon layer adjacent the insulating layer and a second set of features at a second level in the silicon layer further from the insulating layer, the method comprising the steps of:

- selecting a silicon-on-insulator chip having a silicon layer of sufficient thickness for the first set of features;

- fabricating the first set of features in the silicon layer so as to form said first set of features at a first level in the silicon layer;

- increasing the thickness of the silicon layer in selected areas so as to form a second level of the silicon layer over at least part of the first level; and

- fabricating the second set of features at the second level in the silicon layer

Accordingly to a further aspect of the invention there is provided an integrated optical component obtainable by such a method.

Preferred and optional features will be apparent from the following descriptions and from the subsidiary claims of the specification.

The invention will now be further described, merely by way of example, with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figures 1A, 1B and 1C illustrate sources in inaccuracy of the fabrication of integrated optical circuits.

Figure 2A is a plan view of an integrated optical waveguide having wedge-shaped tapers at each end, and Figures 2B and 2C are cross-sectional views across the waveguide at lines B-B and C-C of Figure 2A;

Figure 3 is a perspective view of one end of a waveguide such as that shown in Figures 2A;

Figures 4A, 4B 4C and 4D illustrate a method according to the present invention for the fabrication of features of a component such as those shown in Figure 2C; and

Figure 5 corresponds to Figure 4C and illustrates the crystalline structure of the silicon layer as its thickness is increased.

Figures 1A, 1B and 1C are schematic diagrams of a cross-section through a silicon-on-insulator (SOI) chip comprising a silicon layer 1 separated from a substrate 2, typically also of silicon, by an insulating layer 3, typically of silicon dioxide.

Figure 1A shows variations (shown exaggerated) in the thickness of the silicon layer which is nominally 5 microns thick. Such variations may be in the order of $\pm 5\%$, i.e. around ± 0.25 microns for a 5 mm thick silicon layer.

Figure 1B shows variations (again, shown exaggerated) in the thickness of a silicon layer which is nominally 10 microns in thickness. Again, the thickness

of the layer is subject to variations of $\pm 5\%$. i.e. around ± 0.5 microns for a 10 micron thick silicon layer.

Figure 1C shows a recess etched in the silicon layer. The depth of the recess can only be controlled to an accuracy of $\pm 5\%$, particularly for etch depths greater than 5 microns, resulting in variations of the etch depth of ± 0.25 microns or more.

These sources of error are accumulative so the overall variation in the etch depth, and thus the thickness of the silicon layer remaining at the base of the recess in Figure 1C, can vary by up to ± 0.75 microns. Such a level of variation may be unacceptable in mass produced components as a high proportion of components have to be rejected as they are not formed within the required tolerance.

Figure 2A is a plan view of a rib waveguide 5 formed in the silicon layer of an SOI chip. The rib of such a waveguide typically has a height of around 1.5 microns (measured from the surface of the adjacent areas of silicon). Tapered structures 6 are provided at the ends of the waveguide between the rib waveguide 5 and the end faces 6A which are to be coupled with optical fibres (not shown) so the end faces 6A have a size more compatible with the size of the core of the optical fibre. Tapered structures 6 comprise a triangular-shaped upper portion 6B on top of the rib waveguide 5. Further details of such a tapered structure are given in WO98/35250 the disclosure of which is incorporated herein. The triangular portion 6B, as described in WO98/35250, typically has a thickness of about 5 microns so the overall thickness of the waveguide from the insulating layer 3 to the upper surface of the triangular portion 6B, is around 10 microns. However, as indicated above, a need arises in some cases for this thickness to be increased to 13 microns or more in which case the thickness of the triangular portion needs to be 8 microns or more.

Figure 2B is a cross-section along line B-B of Figure 2A and shows a section through a portion of the rib waveguide 5. Figure 2C is a cross-section along line C-C of Figure 2A and shows a section through a triangular portion 6B part way along its length.

Figure 3 shows a perspective view of a tapered structure 6 at one end of a waveguide 5 as shown in Figure 2A. The end face 6A of the waveguide is also provided with a widened portion 6C, known as a "T-bar", as disclosed in GB2334789A. The end of the waveguide 5 and the tapered structure 6 are also formed on a portion 1A of the silicon layer which overhangs the inclined end face 7A of a V-groove 7 for receiving an optical fibre (not shown). The use of such an overhang for coupling an integrated waveguide to an optical fibre is described in WO97/42534.

Figures 4A, 4B 4C and 4D illustrate steps involved in fabricating an integrated optical component such as that described in relation to Figures 2 and 3. It will be appreciated that the waveguide structure shown in these figures comprises a first set of features at a first level in the silicon layer 1, i.e. the rib 5 and recess 8 on either side thereof, these features being formed in a level of the silicon layer 1 up to 5 microns from the insulating layer 3, and a second set of features at a second level in the silicon layer 1, i.e. the triangular portion 6B a level of the silicon layer between 5 and 13 microns from the insulating laser.

To avoid the problems associated with fabricating such features in a silicon layer having a thickness greater than 10 microns, an SOI chip having a silicon layer of sufficient thickness to form the first set of features, i.e. the rib waveguide 5, is initially selected. The silicon layer preferably has a thickness of 10 microns or less and, most preferably, of 5 microns. A rib waveguide is fabricated in this silicon layer by etching the recesses 9 on either side thereof by known lithographic processes resulting in a structure as shown in Figure 4A. This figure also shows an oxide layer 10 covering the rib waveguide 5, the recesses 9 and the adjacent silicon layer 1. Such a structure can be formed with great accuracy as it is a relatively planar structure, as variations in

the thickness of the silicon layer 1 are small, as the thickness of the layer 1 is small (e.g. around 5 microns), and because the recesses 9 to be etched are relatively shallow, e.g. around 1.5 microns. Recesses of such depth can typically be formed to an accuracy of $\pm 1.5\%$.

The oxide layer on the upper surface of the rib waveguide 5 in the region where the second set of features, i.e. the triangular portion 6B, are to be formed is then removed as shown in Figure 4B, e.g. by etching.

The thickness of the silicon layer over the exposed areas of the initial silicon layer is then increased, e.g. by epitaxial growth, to produce the structure shown in Figure 4C. This structure has a relatively flat top surface suitable for receiving photolithographic masks. The thickness of the silicon layer is preferably increased by at least 5 microns and most preferably by at least 8 microns.

A high resolution photo-resist 12 is then deposited over the areas of the silicon layer 11 which are to remain (as shown in Figure 4C) and the remaining areas of the layer 11 are etched away to leave the structure shown in Figure 4D. The second set of features, i.e. the shape of the triangular portion 6B, are thus formed in the second level of silicon provided on top of the first level of silicon and formation of this second set of features does not disturb the first set of features, i.e. the rib waveguide 56 etc., formed in the first level of the silicon layer 1.

The problems discussed above are thus avoided by fabricating the silicon layer in two stages and by fabricating features in the first level of the silicon layer before the second level of the silicon layer is formed. This two-stage method thus enables components having a relatively large thickness, e.g. of 10 microns or more, measured from the insulating layer 3, to be fabricated with greater accuracy and greater consistency, so increasing the yield in the mass production of such components.

In an alternative form of the method described above, the silicon layer 11 may be formed by depositing amorphous polycrystalline silicon over the structure shown in Figure 4B. The unwanted areas of the layer 11 can then be etched away in the manner described above. The resulting structure may then need to be heated to around 1100°C to re-crystallize the silicon in the remaining areas of the layer 11. The re-crystallized area tends to grow from the boundary with the lower silicon level so helping to reduce defects in the boundary between the two levels.

When silicon is deposited by epitaxial growth as described above it forms a single crystal over the exposed area of the silicon layer 1 on the top surface of the rib waveguide 5 without the need for heat treatment.

Figure 5 shows the crystalline structure of the silicon grown or deposited to increase the thickness of the silicon layer. A single crystal area 11A forms over the exposed area of the lower level of silicon, either by epitaxial growth therefrom or when the amorphous silicon is heated. The remainder of the silicon deposited or grown over the oxide layer tends to be polycrystalline as shown in the areas 11B but this is etched away as described above in relation to Figures 4C and 4D. The dashed lines 13 in Figure 5 indicate the boundaries between the silicon to be etched away and that which remains to form the triangular portion 6B.

A similar two-stage process may be used to fabricate other integrated components on a silicon-on-insulator chip, particularly components having a first set of features, e.g. a rib waveguide, at a first level in the silicon layer, e.g. up to 5 microns from the insulating layer, and a second set of features at a second level in the silicon layer where the second layer has a thickness of 5 microns or more or even 8 microns or more.

The process may also be extended to three or more stages, e.g. in which three or more levels of silicon are formed at different stages and features are formed in each layer before the subsequent layer is formed. WO98/35250

describes a three level tapered structure which could be formed by such a three-stage process.

CLAIMS

- 1 A method of fabricating an integrated optical component on a silicon-on-insulator chip comprising a silicon layer separated from a substrate by an insulating layer, the component having a first set of features at a first level in the silicon layer adjacent the insulating layer and a second set of features at a second level in the silicon layer further from the insulating layer, the method comprising the steps of:

selecting a silicon-on-insulator chip having a silicon layer of sufficient thickness for the first set of features;

fabricating the first set of features in the silicon layer so as to form said first set of features at a first level in the silicon layer;

increasing the thickness of the silicon layer in selected areas so as to form a second level of the silicon layer over at least part of the first level; and

fabricating the second set of features at the second level in the silicon layer.
2. A method as claimed in claim 1 comprising the step of selecting a silicon-on-insulator chip having a silicon layer with a thickness of 10 microns or less and preferably 5 microns or less.
3. A method as claimed in claim 2 in which the thickness of the silicon layer is increased by at least 5 microns and preferably by at least 8 microns.
4. A method as claimed in any preceding claim in which the first set of features is fabricated by photolithography.

5. A method as claimed in any preceding claim in which the second set of features is fabricated by photolithography.
6. A method as claimed in any preceding claim in which the thickness of the silicon layer is increased by epitaxial growth.
7. A method as claimed in claim 1 to 5 in which the thickness of the silicon layer is increased by deposition of polycrystalline silicon.
8. A method as claimed in claim 7 in which, after deposition, the polycrystalline silicon is heated so that it re-crystallises at least in the selected areas.
9. A method as claimed in any of claims 1-9 in which the first set of features are defined to an accuracy of $\pm 5\%$ and preferably to an accuracy of $\pm 1.5\%$.
10. A method as claimed in any preceding claim in which the first set of feature define a rib waveguide.
11. A method as claimed in claim 10 in which the second set of features define a structure on top of the rib waveguide.
12. A method as claimed in claim 11 in which the structure comprises a triangular shaped portion which, with the underlying rib waveguide, forms a tapered rib waveguide for use in providing an optical coupling between the rib waveguide and an optical fibre.
13. A method substantially as hereinbefore described and/or with reference to the accompanying drawings.
14. An integrated optical component formed on a silicon-on-insulator chip obtainable by a method as claimed in any of claims 1 to 13.

15. An integrated optical component substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to and/or as shown in the accompanying drawing.

Amendments to the claims have been filed as follows

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CLAIMS

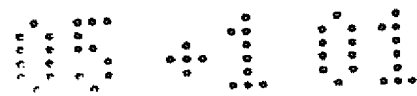
- 1 A method of fabricating an integrated optical component on a silicon-on-insulator chip comprising a crystalline silicon layer separated from a substrate by an insulating layer, the component having a first set of features at a first level in the silicon layer adjacent the insulating layer and a second set of features at a second level in the silicon layer further from the insulating layer, the method comprising the steps of:

selecting a silicon-on-insulator chip having a crystalline silicon layer of sufficient thickness for the first set of features;

fabricating the first set of features in the crystalline silicon layer so as to form said first set of features at a first level in the silicon layer;

increasing the thickness of the crystalline silicon layer in selected areas so as to form a second level of the silicon layer over at least part of the first level; and

fabricating the second set of features at the second level in the silicon layer.
2. A method as claimed in claim 1 comprising the step of selecting a silicon-on-insulator chip having a silicon layer with a thickness of 10 microns or less and preferably 5 microns or less.
3. A method as claimed in claim 2 in which the thickness of the silicon layer is increased by at least 5 microns and preferably by at least 8 microns.
4. A method as claimed in any preceding claim in which the first set of features is fabricated by photolithography.



5. A method as claimed in any preceding claim in which the second set of features is fabricated by photolithography.
6. A method as claimed in any preceding claim in which the thickness of the silicon layer is increased by epitaxial growth.
7. A method as claimed in claim 1 to 5 in which the thickness of the silicon layer is increased by deposition of polycrystalline silicon which re-crystallizes in the selected areas.
8. A method as claimed in claim 7 in which, after deposition, the polycrystalline silicon is heated to around 1100°C so that it re-crystallises at least in the selected areas.
9. A method as claimed in any of claims 1-9 in which the first set of features are defined to an accuracy of $\pm 5\%$ and preferably to an accuracy of $\pm 1.5\%$.
10. A method as claimed in any preceding claim in which the first set of feature define a rib waveguide.
11. A method as claimed in claim 10 in which the second set of features define a structure on top of the rib waveguide.
12. A method as claimed in claim 11 in which the structure comprises a triangular shaped portion which, with the underlying rib waveguide, forms a tapered rib waveguide for use in providing an optical coupling between the rib waveguide and an optical fibre.
13. A method substantially as hereinbefore described and/or with reference to Figure 4 and 5 of the accompanying drawings.

14. An integrated optical component formed on a silicon-on-insulator chip obtainable by a method as claimed in any of claims 1 to 13.
15. An integrated optical component substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to and/or as shown in Figure 2, 3 and 5 of the accompanying drawings.



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Application No: GB 9924098.8
Claims searched: 1-15

Examiner: Meredith Reynolds
Date of search: 17 December 1999

Patents Act 1977
Search Report under Section 17

Databases searched:

UK Patent Office collections, including GB, EP, WO & US patent specifications, in:

UK Cl (Ed.Q): G2J (JGDA), G2X (XB20B, XB20X)

Int Cl (Ed.6): G02B 6/12, 6/16

Other:

Documents considered to be relevant:

Category	Identity of document and relevant passage	Relevant to claims
X	WO 96/41219A (Laurent-Lund)(Figs 9-14,pp 10-13)	1-4
X	WO 93/16403A (BT)(Figs 1-2, pp 7-8)	1
A	WO 92/18888A (Raychem)(Figs 10-24)	

X	Document indicating lack of novelty or inventive step	A	Document indicating technological background and/or state of the art.
Y	Document indicating lack of inventive step if combined with one or more other documents of same category.	P	Document published on or after the declared priority date but before the filing date of this invention.
&	Member of the same patent family	E	Patent document published on or after, but with priority date earlier than, the filing date of this application.

